INTERMOUNTAIN STATION
Central Reference File
No. 0.73

FOREST SERVICE
RECEIVED
JUL 14 941
RESEARCH
INTERMOUNTAIN

Anthracite Survey Paper No. 3

June 26, 1941

TAX DELINQUENCY OF FOREST LANDS IN THE ANTHRACITE FOREST REGION OF PENNSYLVANIA

A County Opportunity and Responsibility

PROGRESS REPORT

ALLEGHENY FOREST EXPERIMENT STATION

ECONOMIC SURVEY
ANTHRACITE FOREST REGION

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

FOREST SERVICE

ALLEGHENY FOREST EXPERIMENT STATION
In cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania
3437 Woodland Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa.

Hardy L. Shirley, Director

Anthracite Forest Region is a convenient name for 15 counties, shown on the map on the back of this publication, which contain or surround the hard-coal deposits of Pennsylvania. The forests of this region are now badly depleted. But preliminary estimates indicate that under good management they might in time furnish most of the forest products and services the region requires.

The Economic Survey of this region aims to determine:

(1) How many of the unemployed may be put to work now to upbuild the forest?

(2) How much labor might be employed in permanent industries based on the restored forest?

Full answers to these questions will be of utmost value both now and in the period of readjustment following the national defense emergency.

This paper was prepared by

DIVISION OF FOREST ECONOMICS

R. D. Forbes, Senior Forester

ECONOMIC SURVEY, ANTHRACITE FOREST REGION
Kingston Branch Post Office, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Clement Mesavage, Assistant Forester
Clifford W. Beck, Agent

TAX DELINQUENCY OF FOREST LANDS IN THE ANTHRACITE FOREST REGION OF PENNSYLVANIA

A County Opportunity and Responsibility

by R. D. Forbes and C. W. Beck*

The counties of the Anthracite Forest Region of Pennsylvania have borne their full share of the economic and social ills from which the region began to suffer long before the depression. National defense activities may make possible in some counties a partial and temporary recovery from these ills. But a permanent cure for unemployment and crippled public services can be achieved only through planned development of all basic natural resources, and of industries dependent on them.

Among these natural resources none has been more abused and neglected than the forests. The nearly 2,600,000 acres of forest land in the region comprise from 20 to 84 percent of the individual counties. Over-cutting of the timber, and forest fires, have reduced vast areas of once highly-productive forest to scrub oak, aspen, and grey birch. Practically none of the remaining acreage is fully productive. Tens of thousands of acres, mostly denuded, are today in county hands as the result of tax delinquency, and in some counties are rapidly becoming a major problem.

---

*James A. Noonan, Junior Field Assistant, obtained much of the information collected in the early stages of this study. Dr. Edward W. Carter, University of Pennsylvania, special consultant to the Survey, helped to plan the study and this publication. Lillian E. Taylor, Senior Clerk, made the computations.

What County Records Show

The following tables and text present information, drawn from county records*, as to the extent, importance, and probable causes of tax delinquency.

County Forest Lands No Longer Subject to Redemption.

In Table 1 are shown forest properties of 50 acres or more which have been in county ownership as a result of tax sales for longer than the period allowed for redemption**. There are 343 of them, aggregating 63,000 acres, with an average size of 184 acres. They are distributed among 11 of the 15 counties as follows:

---

* The records were consulted during 1940 and 1941. They were placed at our disposal by county officials, whose cooperation and interest are gratefully acknowledged. Township data are too bulky to present here, but are on file in the field office of the Survey, Kingston Branch Post Office, Wilkes-Barre. A full description of methods used in obtaining and analyzing the information is available on request.

** In Pennsylvania tax-delinquent land is first advertised and offered at public sale by the County Treasurer. Properties for which no offer of purchase is received are "bid in" by the County Commissioners, who hold them for the period - now two years - allowed for redemption by the owner. At the expiration of the redemption period the Commissioners are today required to offer the land again at public sale; formerly this was not mandatory. Moratoria on both Treasurer's and Commissioners' sales were declared in Pennsylvania during 1931-39.

TABLE 1. FOREST PROPERTIES OF 50 ACRES OR MORE IN COUNTY OWNERSHIP AND NO LONGER SUBJECT TO REDEMPTION. MAY 1, 1941

County	Number of Properties	Average Area Acres	Total Area Acres
Carbon	43	198	8,528
Columbia	17	119	2,027
Dauphin	15	161	2,413
Lackawanna	5	152	759
Luzerne	13	177	2,304
Monroe	21	270	5,669
Northumberland	6	94	563
Schuylkill	178*	191	34,043
Susquehanna	30	125	3,757
Wayne	2	82	165
Wyoming	13	213	2,773
Totals or Averages	343	184	63,001

* Including 66 properties, aggregating 15,010 acres, in litigation.

It should be noted that the true acreage of such properties may be considerably less than the table indicates. In most counties local officials have not had the resources to investigate the properties appearing on their records as unredeemed. Such investigations are necessary to reveal duplications, clerical errors, inadequate description, and squatters' rights, which would reduce the total area actually in county ownership. Office and field studies by the Survey in one county, for example, which held no Treasurer's sale between 1911 and 1940, led to a 40 percent reduction in the number of properties long in county ownership. In some other counties, on the advice of local officials, we have eliminated all properties not on recent lists. Except for one county, the above table includes no properties which became tax delinquent later than 1934. The Survey regards the 63,000 acres shown in Table 1 as the best available estimate of forest land now county owned as a result of tax delinquency.

County-owned Forest Land Still Subject to Redemption.

Table 2 shows the distribution of over 57,000 acres of forest land, in properties of 50 acres or more, which were sold to the County Commissioners at recent Treasurer's sales, and are still subject to redemption by the former owners. There are some such properties in every county of the Anthracite Forest Region except Lebanon.

TABLE 2. FOREST PROPERTIES OF 50 ACRES OR MORE IN COUNTY OWNERSHIP BUT SUBJECT TO REDEMPTION. MAY 1, 1941.

County	Number of Properties	Average Area Acres	Total Area Acres
Carbon	10	363	3,634
Columbia	13	87	1,136
Dauphin	8	189	1,511
Lackawanna	28	159	4,445
Luzerne	107	118	12,651
Monroe	21	168	3,539
Montour	3	96	289
Northumberland	11	90	996
Pike	9	150	1,348
Schuylkill	47	209	9,807
Sullivan	45	135	6,068
Susquehanna	89	79	7,081
Wayne	21	115	2,414
Wyoming	9	259	2,335
Totals or Averages	421	136	57,254

In contrast with the figures in Table 1, those in Table 2 are unquestionably low. That is, although correct so far as formal county proprietorship is concerned, they by no means reveal the full extent of forest land now tax delinquent. In 10 counties tax sales have not yet covered seated lands becoming delinquent in any later year than 1934. Only in Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Wyoming are such sales up-to-date, or nearly so.

How much the sales, now mandatory, covering the seven years since 1934 will increase the total forest area at least temporarily in county hands is hard to estimate. Susquehanna County, which has kept up its annual or biennial sales, found that about the same acreage of forest land became delinquent each year from 1933 to 1937. Even assuming that the peak of delinquency has passed, it is probable that recent additions are substantial.

Little forest land sold at Treasurers' sales in 1940 has yet been redeemed. Although some counties have had considerable success in helping the former owners to resume proprietorship, or in selling the land to others, officials in nearly all counties inform us that more and more effort is needed to dispose permanently of tax delinquent land in these ways. Speculation in such land, which has become a scandal in some other States, is appearing here. Where re-sale at a profit proves impossible within a few years, the speculator strips off every remnant of merchantable timber. He then allows the land to return to the county as tax delinquent.

The Counties' Opportunity

When forest lands become tax delinquent and pass into county ownership, it is likely to be because they have been wrecked by over-cutting and fire. Income from wrecked lands is negligible. The long time required to restore them to productivity, the cost, and unfamiliarity with the forestry practices involved, discourage the individual land owner. Sale by the county to the State is sometimes possible, either for State Forests or State Game Lands. The properties must generally be of considerable size, or adjoin land already in State ownership, to be attractive to the Department of Forests and Waters or the Game Commission. At present only the Game Commission has funds for land purchase.

Fortunately there is legislation in effect to enable the counties themselves to approach constructively the problem presented by these lands. The County Forest Act of 1933 (P.L. 30) provides that tax delinquent lands may be continued in county ownership and managed as county forests. Under public control restoration of the forest for one purpose or another is economically possible.

Forest restoration requires intensified protection against fire, insects, and disease, and artificial planting of the worst-denuded land with trees or other useful vegetation. Here is work for the unemployed - work, moreover, that does not compete with private enterprise. Weeding, thinning, and pruning of the young forest, wildlife management, and proper harvesting of the timber as it matures, will continue to provide jobs in the woods.

When fully restored these county-owned forests will prove attractive as a source of raw material to permanent local industries. Substantial cash returns to local governments in many parts of the world result from sales of wood in community forests. Even today county forests will provide nearby communities with healthful outdoor recreation; they will prevent soil erosion, lessen floods, and safeguard local water supplies. These benefits will in turn be reflected in new sources of public revenue, improved public health, and larger private payrolls.

Emergency Funds May Be Used in County Forests

The Federal funds of various emergency agencies may be used for protection and management of county forests. It is true that their use on private lands has been restricted by law or regulations to protection against fire and erosion. But on public lands they may be used for all types of forestry work. For example, for varying periods since 1933, 12 CCC camps of 200 men each have been employed on the 116,000 acres of State Forests, and on certain privately-owned areas, in the anthracite forest region. They have built roads, cleared firebreaks, erected lookout towers, controlled insects, and developed recreational facilities. CCC labor has been recently employed in protection and development of the 13,000-acre National Recreational Demonstration Area on Hickory Run, Carbon County. A $1,600,000 project to strengthen protection, and improve cover and food supplies, on 140,000 acres of State Game Lands in 8 of the 15 anthracite forest counties was recently approved by the WPA. The NYA has in the

past two years spent about $15,000 in forest fire prevention patrol of private lands in the hard-coal region under the direction of the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters.

Local Administration Feasible

The rather small average size of the county-owned properties, and their scattered distribution, which have lessened their attractiveness for State ownership, need not debar them from consideration as county forests. An official of one county recently suggested that custodianship of small areas could be added to the duties of certain county employees at little or no additional expense. Chambers of Commerce, service clubs, and other community groups -- such as organized sportsmen -- have already shown an interest in the development of local forest tracts. By crystallizing such interest into effective measures adapted to local conditions the problem of protecting and administering relatively small areas may be solved.

Assembling of larger units is not out of the question, even without future additions to the area tax-delinquent. For example, two or more tracts in county ownership may be found to adjoin. Again, tracts below 50 acres -- omitted from this preliminary study -- may enlarge the usable area. Finally, there are many "farms" in county ownership which do not today include 50 acres of timber, but which are presumably better suited to forests than any other crop. In this category was about 1/7 of the rural area advertised for sale in 1940 by the Commissioners of Schuylkill County. In recent Treasurers' sales in Luzerne and Susquehanna Counties the ratios were 1/3 and 3/4,

respectively. Such tax delinquent farms will be fully as attractive for certain types of county forests as properties entirely in forest. New York State has had an extensive program of developing abandoned farms for forestry purposes.

Are Forest Assessments and Taxes Too High?

The responsibility of county and other local governments toward forest resources in the anthracite region does not stop with the conversion into county forests of lands now tax-delinquent. Public acquisition of forest land for a specific purpose - a park, for example - may be thoroughly justified. But as a county policy the wholesale or random acquisition of county forests as a result of the misfortune of private owners is unthinkable. To prevent tax delinquency is a major responsibility of local governments.

What are the causes of tax delinquency? Excessive taxation is one which immediately suggests itself. The Survey has therefore made a preliminary investigation of forest land assessments and taxes. Average county figures appear in Table 3. The second column, by combining the information given in Tables 1 and 2, shows the number of acres of tax-delinquent land in relation to the total acreage of private forest in each county.

TABLE 3. TAX DELINQUENCY IN RELATION TO ESTIMATED AVERAGE ASSESSED VALUE AND AVERAGE ANNUAL PROPERTY TAX ON FOREST LAND.

County	Number of acres of tax-delinquent forest* per 1,000 acres of private forest.**	Averaged assessed value per acre.	Average annual tax per acre.**
Carbon	79	$3.06	$0.13
Columbia	34	3.57	.10
Dauphin	37	3.40	.10
Lackawanna	43	6.65	.21
Lebanon	0	5.27	.07
Luzerne	50	2.66	.11
Monroe	51	2.50	.08
Montour	17	5.03	.10
Northumberland	16	3.63	.12
Pike	6	4.53	.08
Schuylkill	182	5.04	.20
Sullivan	57	2.87	.10
Susquehanna	65	5.61	.17
Wayne	12	3.25	.10
Wyoming	52	4.72	.19

* In forest properties of 50 acres or more.

** Some of the information used in calculating the values in these columns was obtained from the State Planning Board, Penna. Dept. of Commerce.

The above figures reveal a wide variation in both average assessments and average taxes of forest land from county to county. This variation may well correspond to variation in actual wood production and accessibility of properties or to differences in their usefulness for recreation and watershed protection. Lack of uniformity in assessment practices is also involved. It would therefore be unwise to conclude from the fact that some counties have high taxes and much delinquency, and others low taxes and little delinquency, that one condition is the cause of the other. Only a careful study of the productivity and value of anthracite region forests will make it possible to show that assessments on the average forest property in any county, and the taxes levied against them, are too high - that is, out of proportion to income. The Survey has such a study under way*. Even this study will reveal nothing with respect to individual properties.

In general, well-stocked and thrifty forests on average soils are believed to be capable of paying the average tax shown in the above table for any county. Forests of scrub oak, aspen, grey birch, or less are certainly incapable of paying even a fraction of these taxes. An exception would be tracts yielding high returns from recreational or watershed use.

The Survey strongly recommends that the counties and townships review their tax procedure to make sure that present taxes on individual forest properties are not out of proportion to their values.

---

* Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties have so far been covered.

In estimating such values, full weight must of course be given to capacity to produce income. We do not imply that the counties should consider reducing to zero the assessment on forest lands from which all forest growth of value has been "skinned off," and recreational and watershed values dissipated. If the owner who has thus abused his land can no longer pay taxes in accordance with whatever market value remains, he is clearly unable to spend the money necessary to restore it to productive use. The only hope of restoration lies in public ownership and management.

Forest Productivity is Too Low

Regardless of whether taxes on the existing forest are high or low, everyone familiar with the anthracite region will agree that forest productivity is too low. The occasional tract of tall, mature sawtimber, or dense young stand of mine props and cordwood, contrasts vividly with great areas of mere brush or partially-forested burns. The direct interest of local governments in bringing productivity of private forest land to the highest point is well indicated in Table 4. With a major portion of their surface in forest, many counties will find that forest land is today an astonishingly small part of their tax base. It is important to realize, of course, that the forest land assessments do not include considerable values in other forms of property based upon the forest - such as recreational developments, water works, wood-using plants, and trucks employed in transporting forest products.

TABLE 4. ESTIMATED ASSESSMENT OF FOREST LAND IN RELATION TO ASSESSMENT OF ALL REAL PROPERTY. 1940.

County	Percent forested	Forest land valuation*	Total real property valuation*	Percent of forest valuation to total
Carbon	70	$470,000	$ 26,453,000	1.8
Columbia	35	336,000	26,523,000	1.3
Dauphin	35	359,000	122,992,000	0.3
Lackawanna	47	811,000	167,000,000	0.5
Lebanon	20	162,000	62,771,000	0.3
Luzerne	58	1,095,000	283,364,000	0.4
Monroe	57	450,000	16,829,000	2.7
Montour	21	87,000	4,625,000	1.9
Northumberland	36	350,000	49,015,000	0.7
Pike	84	1,040,000	10,135,000	10.3
Schuylkill	60	1,262,000	106,778,000	1.2
Sullivan	66	308,000	2,789,000	11.0
Susquehanna	35	932,000	15,372,000	6.1
Wayne	46	687,000	13,770,000	5.0
Wyoming	51	462,000	8,552,000	5.4

* Some of the information used in calculating the values in these columns was obtained from the State Planning Board, Penna. Dept. of Commerce, and the Bureau of Statistics, Penna. Dept. of Internal Affairs.

The foregoing table will reassure those who object to any considerable increase in the area of publicly-owned forest, because it subtracts from the county tax base. (The State pays 5 cents yearly to local governments on each acre of State lands, in lieu of taxes.) Only in Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Wyoming Counties would large-scale creation of county forests noticeably reduce the county revenue. Where such forests are created from land long tax delinquent, the objection has already lost its force.

In certain townships, however, the immediate effect of large scale tax delinquency among forest landowners would be a serious loss of revenue for schools, roads, and public charities. In 54 townships of 8 counties for which information is available forest land assessments are at least 10 percent of the assessment of all real property. In 16 they are at least 20 percent of the total. In 3 they run above 50 percent. These townships in which forest land looms large in the tax base are by no means confined to counties in which the county percentage is comparatively high. Luzerne has 3 townships with 20 percent or more of their taxables in forest land, and 1 with over 40 percent.

Obviously, it is in such townships as these that the most careful consideration should be given to the problems of tax delinquent forest lands, and of the effect of public ownership on local revenues.

Further Responsibility of Local Governments

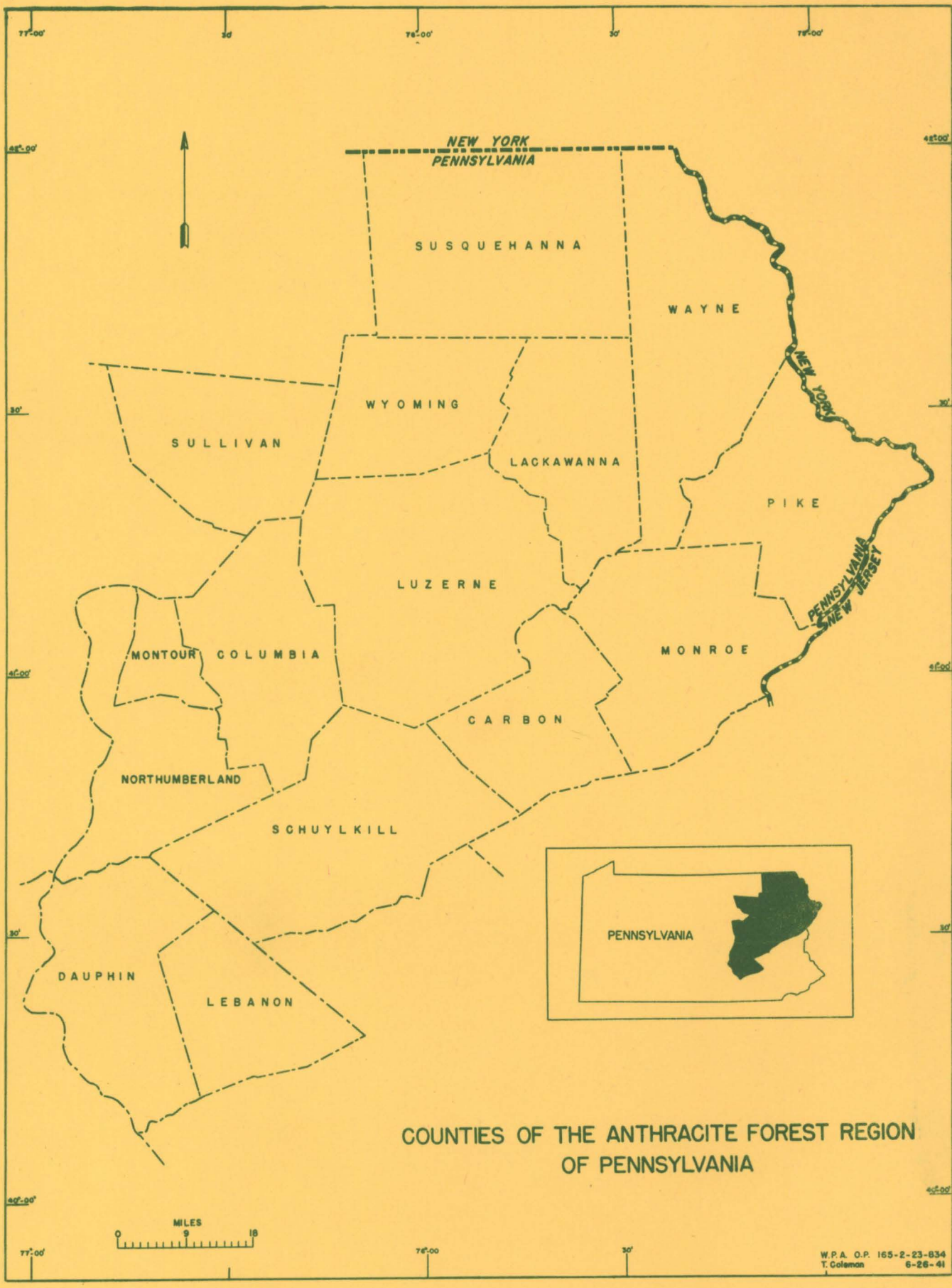
The immediate purpose of the Survey in presenting information on county forest ownership resulting from tax delinquency has been to point out that idle land is now available on which idle men may be put to work. It has recommended that local governments make sure that inequitable taxes are not increasing the area of idle land. These governments, we believe, have further responsibilities toward the forest landowner who would like to put or keep his land in shape to produce earnings, hence taxes. We are collecting information on which to recommend from time to time how these responsibilities can best be redeemed.

In Paper No. 2 of this series the Survey recommended that the counties and townships of the anthracite region cooperate with State and Federal agencies in an intensification of forest fire protection. Without successful protection against fire neither public nor private forest owners can make their properties pay. It should be pointed out that by creating county forests, the counties will go far toward improving fire protection. Everywhere forest land in which the owner takes no interest burns over more often than neighboring land. Community effort to protect and develop county land would greatly increase respect for forest land, regardless of ownership. Such respect is a long step toward full and sustained development of one of the region's greatest natural resources.

ALLEGHENY FOREST RESEARCH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Francis R. Cope, Jr., Chairman	Proprietor, Woodbourne Dairy and Orchards, Dimock, Pennsylvania
J. R. Schramm, Vice-Chairman	Head, Department of Botany, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.
Charles E. Baer	Deputy Secretary, Department of Forests and Waters, Harrisburg, Pa.
Victor Beede	Head, Department of Forestry, Pennsylvania State College, State College, Pa.
F. W. Besley	State Forester, Baltimore, Maryland
E. O. Ehrhart	Forester, Armstrong Forest Company, Johnsonburg, Pa.
S. W. Fletcher	Director, Pennsylvania Agricultural Experiment Station, State College, Pa.
O. E. Jennings	Head, Department of Biology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.
Paul Koenig	Vice-President and General Manager, T. H. Glatfelter Company, Spring Grove, Pa.
Louis Krumenacker	Manager, Krumenacker Lumber Company, Stoyestown, Pa.
D. C. Lefevre	Superintendent of Lands, Clearfield Bituminous Coal Company, Indiana, Pa.
William H. Martin	Director, New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, New Brunswick, N. J.
H. Gleason Mattoon	Secretary, Pennsylvania Forestry Association, Philadelphia, Pa.
Stanley Mesavage	Forester, Wyoming Valley Chamber of Commerce, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
David W. Robinson	Executive Secretary, Interstate Commission on the Delaware River Basin, Philadelphia, Pa.
M. B. Saul	Counsel, The Morris Foundation, Morris Arboretum, Philadelphia, Pa.
George L. Schuster	Director, Agricultural Experiment Station, Newark, Delaware
J. Spencer Smith	President, New Jersey Board of Commerce and Navigation, Tenafly, New Jersey
W. S. Taber	State Forester, Dover, Delaware
Ezra B. Whitman	Engineer, Whitman, Requardt and Smith, Baltimore, Maryland
C. P. Wilber	State Forester, Department of Conservation and Development, Trenton, N. J.
Abel Wolman	Professor Sanitary Engineering, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.

Hardy L. Shirley, Secretary	Director, Allegheny Forest Experiment Station, Philadelphia, Pa.



COUNTIES OF THE ANTHRACITE FOREST REGION OF PENNSYLVANIA